

BOOK REVIEW

West Point: Character, Leadership, Education – a Book Developed from the Readings and Writings of Thomas Jefferson

by Norman Thomas Remick

reviewed by Joseph C. Piff

This book, “West Point: Character, Leadership, Education – a Book Developed from the Readings and Writings of Thomas Jefferson,” is written in a conversational style. A character named “Thomas” walks and talks a current U.S. Congressperson (named “Harry”) through the history that went into the thought process of Thomas Jefferson as he was running for, and winning, the Presidency of the United States. I have to admit that I was skeptical of the format as I read the book’s introduction. However, the format made the reading light, easy, and interesting, which is quite an accomplishment when you consider that a large portion of the book deals with philosophy and authors such as Plato and Aristotle.

Mr. Jefferson did not believe in a standing army. As we think back to Revolutionary times, when the British maintained an army on Colonial soil to ensure the obedience of the colonists, we see from where his disaffection with the idea comes. However, he knows that he must swear to “preserve, protect, and defend” the Constitution of the United States when he takes the oath of office. This book takes us through the history that Thomas Jefferson read to establish both his and our value system that leads him to found the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Mr. Remick states that he read “170 books, bits of hundreds of other books, more than 10,000 letters written by Thomas Jefferson, and hundreds of other letters and documents. ... It may be the most deeply researched book on West Point.”

Mr. Remick uses the philosopher’s method of story telling, followed by a listing of the “Virtue” displayed or developed in that story. Throughout the book, 78 virtues (although some virtues are repeated) are identified. Virtues include character, wisdom, compassion, dedication, duty, honor, loyalty, determination, initiative, sacrifice, self-discipline, self-confidence, etc. Each story is well researched (although I must admit a serious lack of knowledge of Plato’s, Aristotle’s and other historical writings), well developed, and interestingly told. There are even cartoons illustrating many of these stories. Since no other credits are given, I assume the author drew these cartoons.

The second-to-last chapter of the book (Section 8, Chapter 1) presents a good view of current life at West Point (and, I assume, the other military academies) while Section 2 is a picture tour of campus, giving some history of the pictured buildings. The former chapter is a very good read for anyone who has high school students that are considering attending (or you are considering sending to) one of the military academies. It clearly presents the fact that, given that the primary difference of a military academy from other institutions of higher learning is the responsibility to train military leaders, the training is HARD! It also clearly shows that each step from matriculation through graduation is precisely chosen to develop the “good leaders” that Thomas Jefferson intended.

In the last chapter of the book, Congressperson “Harry” is delivering his speech to the assembled representatives of the people to ensure continued funding of West Point. This gives Mr. Remick a forum to summarize the preceding 400 pages in just ten pages, and he does it superbly.

So, who should read this book? Everyone! How many places can you find Greek, Roman, Judean, Christian, European, and American (through July 4, 1826, Jefferson’s death) philosophy summarized in plain English in just a little over 400 pages? If you are already an honorable, virtuous person, it will reinforce your knowledge that your day-to-day activities make you a great leader. If not, well, at least you will have new guidance. Enjoy.